

LETTER TO A YOUNG POET

If I write poems about myself to you,
Surely you understand I write about you
To yourself, my part of the pronoun a mirror,
The silvered back that shows you how you feel.
Of course, I can see through, and you cannot.
This morning I turned the mirror around; maybe
The poems I write about you to myself
Would catch me telling myself truth of me.

It is not that sort of a mirror. You cannot
See me through it, and I cannot see you,
And what I was looking at was not me at all.
At first I thought I had found that opposite
Yeats says lurks and wanders in the world
Somewhere for each one, his not-himself.
I had always sought this revelation of evil.
Confronted by my worst, I could re-make
My best self, counterparting the extremes.
That this other might be my angel, I demon,
Ancestral habit never allowed.

It was neither.

But it was both. Both faces surfaced there,
Almost smoothed into one on the thin glass,
And neither was naked, either one masked one.

I had not thought the situation so desperate.

Demon would not rise, nor angel fall.
No triumph, no defeat, in fact no battle.
We grow not better nor worse as we grow old,
Only more like ourselves, and here I was,
Pinched in my own metaphor, that began
So harmlessly, supposing a double mirror.

The harm was in doing it by morning light.
Write when the world is miles away in bed.
Never tell anyone what you're working on.
Lock up the worksheets, for some library
After you're dead, or burn them all now.
Neither give nor take courses in writing poems.
Some mystery about it is only decent. Don't

Even wear disguises. The poet is alone.
Had I not been warned? I'd twitched a loose end
Before, and had the poem come clattering down,
A slither of rotted adjectives and whiches,
The ill-timbered concept a woodpile, and my hair
Dirtied by slow-settling dust; no broken bones.

I know how the balance rests, not rests but rides
On an invisible point sprung from another point
Held there by nothing, a secret, dark as rock.
It is a spell one says, that is never said.
An edge of it may be touched by an edge of mind.
But first the omens must be listened for,
And I had heard some, but they dwindled off,
And I mistook the silence for that other.
Well, I was lucky. One disaster in one day.

Others have poked their brains into the trap,
Bled nonsense a little at the nipped nose,
And got wiped up and the rag thrown aside,
For talking about it. A painter 'blithely refers';
Or he 'works in controlled collisions of force.'
Of Brahms' Sonata for Cello, No. 1,
We read that 'hearing it is swimming in a dark
Aquarium up toward the sunshiny violin.'

Consider the non-English-speaking physicist
Visiting Einstein, and how only in chalk
They happily blackboarded formulae for hours.
Glass for the glass-man. For the sculptor stone,
A shapely three dimensions out of lump.
For Brahms' cellist his four-string alphabet.
And non-English-speaking critics for all of us.
Let all metaphor in words be the poet's.

I shall write poems about myself to myself,
Like this one, or not like this, or this very one,
And about you to you, a little night-wording
For words' sake on a well-tempered typewriter.

John Holmes